

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF ST. PAUL.

(10) ANGER AND THE SELF-ASSERTIVE VIRTUES.

ATTENTION has been called in a previous paper to the prominence given by St. Paul to the passive virtues. But these, important as they are, do not constitute the whole duty of man in the presence of wrong-doing. To resent and resist may be, as the Apostle himself clearly saw and said, as sacred a duty as to submit. In order, therefore, to maintain that "delicate equipoise" in which all morality has been said to consist, we must balance the passive virtues with what, in the absence of a better term, may be named the self-assertive virtues.

When, however, adopting the method pursued in previous papers, we turn to St. Paul's Epistles in order to collect and collate the various passages relating to our subject, we are somewhat embarrassed to discover how extremely few they are. The poverty of material is the more striking when we compare it with the numerous precepts and varied vocabulary which our study of the passive virtues revealed and brought together. St. Paul does, indeed, make it plain that a man ought to feel and show resentment towards evil doing; but the few occasions on which he says this are far outnumbered by his warnings against all excess and abuse of the passion. This seeming lack of emphasis does not, however, argue any disregard in the Apostle's mind of an important group of virtues, nor does it expose Christian morality to the charge of one-sidedness. As John Stuart Mill has truly observed (without, however, appearing to realize the full significance of his own remark), "the Gospel always refers to a pre-existing morality, and confines its precepts to the particulars in which that morality was to be corrected, or superseded by a wider and higher."¹ When, therefore, we find the early Christian teachers so

eloquent concerning meekness and forbearance, so silent concerning resentment, we have only to remember what Pagan morality was, alike in its theory and practice, in order to understand both their silence and their speech. Moreover, in the case of St. Paul self-knowledge would still further reinforce the natural tendency to exalt the virtues of self-restraint. Every record of the Apostle we possess reveals to us a man of ardent, choleric temperament. A spark was sufficient to kindle his whole being and wrap it in devouring flame. Was it not natural, therefore, that such a man, knowing the perils of his own fiery soul, should speak to men rather of meekness than of wrath, and should urge both upon himself and them the need of banking up and keeping low their inward fires? At no period of the world's history, and least of all perhaps in the days when St. Paul lived and taught, has mankind been by nature "slow to wrath"; rather has it always been, as it still is, quick to resent and loth to forgive. And in the Apostle's teaching, alike in what is said and in what is left unsaid, we may trace the faithful reflection of this twofold fact.

Scanty, however, as our material is, it is not inadequate for our present purpose; and if to the Epistles we join the narrative of the Acts, and so keep in mind what the Apostle did as well as what he said, example and precept together will not fail to suggest a true *via media* between a too tame subservience on the one hand, and an undue self-assertion on the other. We proceed, therefore, to a brief consideration of the relevant scriptures.

I.

The most cursory reading of the Acts of the Apostles will be sufficient to dispel any misapprehension into which we may have been led by St. Paul's teaching concerning the passive virtues. There is, indeed, no inconsistency between

the hero of St. Luke's narrative and the author of the Pauline Epistles ; the man who could speak as St. Paul did to the elders of Ephesus by the seashore at Miletus surely had it in him to write the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians or the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. But what impresses us in St. Luke's portraiture, even more than the tact, the sympathy, the tenderness, of the Apostle, is his firmness, his self-reliance, his boldness in rebuke, his readiness to insist upon himself, and to demand that justice shall be done—the very virtues, in short, which the term "passive" does *not* describe. Note, e.g., the haughty language with which he brings the bustling "Praetors" of Philippi to a sense of their duty, and asserts his right as a Roman citizen : "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men that are Romans, and have cast us into prison ; and do they now cast us out privily ? nay, verily ; but let them come themselves and bring us out."¹ Or take that tremendous scene in the island of Paphos which St. Luke has etched for us, memorable as a group of Greek statuary : the Apostle with blazing eyes and speech like molten lava—"O full of all guile and all villany, thou son of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord ?"—the cowering magician, dumb and blind beneath the lightning of that terrible wrath, and in the background the astonished proconsul.² Again, in the high priest's council chamber in Jerusalem Ananias saw the forked flicker of that angry tongue of fire. The Apostle had just begun his defence when Ananias bade them that stood by to smite him on the mouth : "Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall : and sittest thou to judge me according to the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law ?"³

¹ Acts xvi. 37 ; cp. also xxii. 25-8.

² Acts xiii. 8-12.

³ Acts xxiii. 1-3.

Sometimes as pliant and yielding as a willow, at other times St. Paul would be as unbending as a bar of steel. Once he "thought it not good" to do a certain thing, neither Barnabas nor any other man could move him from his purpose, and he was ready to part with a friend and brother apostle rather than yield.¹

Such is the man whom St. Luke's narrative reveals to us. The same ardent temperament shines and glows in the Epistles. There is the same impatience of weakness, the same restlessness under injustice, the same hot indignation against evildoers. "Who," cries the Apostle, "is made to stumble and I am not on fire?"² With the Judaizers, the men who sought to make of none effect the Cross of Christ, he would make peace on no terms; he crushed them without pity and without remorse whenever they crossed his path. They were "dogs,"³ anathema from Christ.⁴ "Why," he asks with scornful irony, "if they make so much of circumcision, do they stop there? Why do they not mutilate themselves like the priests of Cybele?"⁵ Nor was it only against these nameless Judaizers that the Apostle drew the sword of his rebuke; if St. Peter's primacy cannot ensure his walking "uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel," neither can it shield him from righteous condemnation. "When," says St. Paul, "Cephas came to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he stood condemned."⁶ Even the last letter which we have from his pen, tender and subdued as it is, shows us the old fires still burning: "Alexander the

¹ Acts xv. 37-9.

² 2 Cor. xi. 29.

³ Phil. iii. 2.

⁴ Gal. i. 8, 9.

⁵ Gal. iv. 12. (See Lightfoot *in loc.*) "There is," says Mr. R. H. Hutton, "something positively grim in the Eastern ferocity of the wish expressed in the Epistle to the Galatians (v. 12) against the false brethren who troubled the Church by insisting on the strict Jewish circumcision."—*Theological Essays*, p. 331.

⁶ Gal. ii. 11.

coppersmith did me much evil : the Lord will render to him according to his works." ¹

When we pass from St. Paul's example to his precepts there is little to add, though one or two sayings look in the same direction. When he bids the Ephesians, "Be angry and sin not," ² and when he says that a bishop must be "not soon angry" (*ὄργιλος*), ³ he evidently assumes that anger is not in itself a sin. Are we not, moreover, justified in inferring that St. Paul's ideal of human nature must include something akin to that sternly real element in the Divine nature which he names "the wrath of God" ?

II.

It would be easy to show, did it lie within the scope of this paper to do so, that the conception of duty suggested by the foregoing paragraphs is in complete harmony with the general spirit of Scripture teaching in Old Testament and New Testament alike. To holy men of old their God was "a God that hath indignation every day" ⁴; and the passion which they knew to be in Him was meant they believed to have its counterpart in them. The Hebrew prophets, it has been truly said, did not discuss the sins of the Hebrew people with philosophical serenity, nor condemn them with judicial calmness; some of their discourses are tempestuous with passion." ⁵ And does not the New Testament speak of "the wrath of the Lamb?" Is it not written of the meek and lowly Jesus that He was "moved with indignation," ⁶ that he looked round "with anger," ⁷ that He "entered into the temple of God and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold the doves" ? ⁸ And did ever the wrath of man

¹ 2. Tim. iv. 14.

² Eph. iv. 26.

³ Titus i. 7.

⁴ Psalm vii. 11, R.V.

⁵ R. W. Dale's *Week-Day Sermons*, p. 99.

⁶ Mark x. 13.

⁷ Mark iii. 5.

⁸ Matt. xxi. 12.

clothe itself in more heart-shaking words than those with which He laid bare the shame of men who sat in Moses' seat and boasted that they had Abraham to their father, while yet their evil deeds proclaimed them the children of the devil whose lusts it was their will to do?¹

It is plain, therefore, that according to Christian morality the whole duty of a good man in the presence of evil does not consist in turning his cheek to the smiter and in suffering whatsoever evil is pleased and able to inflict. Rather ought the first impulse roused by the sight of vice to be, as the author of *Ecce Homo* says, the impulse of opposition and hostility. "To convict it, to detect it, to contend with it, to put it down, is the first and indispensable thing . . . It is not mercy but treason against injustice to relent towards vice so long as it is triumphant and insolent."² Nôr has such a feeling anything in common with malice or the spirit of revenge; it is resentment against vice and wickedness, which is one of the bonds by which society is held together, a sharp sword put into our hands for our defence against injury, injustice, and cruelty.³

¹ Matt. xxiii. Many of my readers will be glad to be reminded of the following striking passage from one of F. W. Robertson's letters: "Mr. E— remarked in conversation, that our Lord never once used irony. I alleged Mark vii. 9: 'Full well ye reject,' etc., which after a long discussion, and the production of Greek Testaments, etc., was universally admitted to be decisive. Then came the maxim, that the indignation expressed by Him against hypocrisy was no precedent for us, inasmuch as He spake as a Divine person . . . I contended that it was human, and that if a man did not feel something of the same spirit under similar circumstances, if his blood would not boil with indignation, nor the syllable of withering justice rise to his lips, he could not even conceive His spirit. Mr. E— agreed to this, to my surprise, and told an anecdote. 'Could you not have felt indignation for that, Robertson?' My blood was at the moment running fire—not at his story, however; and I remembered that I had once in my life stood before my fellow-creature with words that scathed and blasted; once in my life I felt a terrible might; I knew, I rejoiced to know, that I was inflicting the sentence of a coward's and a liar's hell." (*Life and Letters*, vol. i. p. 261.

² Pop. ed. p. 245.

³ See Butler's great sermon on Resentment.

Woe to the man or nation that has lost the capacity for righteous anger! "Anger," says Thomas Fuller, "is one of the sinews of the soul; he that wants it hath a maimed mind."

"Man or race is on the downward path
Whose fibre grows too soft for honest wrath."

Mr. John Morley even goes so far as to say that active hatred of cruelty, injustice, and oppression is perhaps the main difference between a good man and a bad one."¹

This is one of the main points at which the ethical teaching of St. Paul is in direct conflict with the doctrine of Seneca and the Stoics with which it has so often been compared. The ideal of the Stoic was *ἀπάθεια*, passionlessness. Anger, in his eyes, was not a wild plant to be trained, but a poisonous weed to be uprooted. Nothing must be tolerated whose presence could disturb the serenity of the mind. "Seneca almost gets angry himself at the very notion of the wise man being angry and indignant even against moral evil."² The gods themselves, it was believed, dwell in some

"lucid interspace of world and world,
Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,
Nor ever falls the least white star of snow,
Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,
Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
Their sacred everlasting calm!"

¹ *Life of Gladstone*, vol. i. p. 193 I cannot deny myself the pleasure of yet another reference to Dean Church, of all modern Englishmen perhaps the most wholly Christian alike in mind and heart. Bishop Paget, his son-in-law, writes concerning him: "Patient as he was, he could be angry when need came; angry with a quiet and self-possessed intensity which made his anger very memorable. The sight of injustice, of strength or wealth presuming on its advantages, of insolence (a word that came from his lips with a peculiar ring and emphasis), called out in him something like the passion that has made men patriots when their people were oppressed, something of that temper which will always make tyranny insecure and persecution hazardous. One felt that many years of quiet and hidden self-control must lie behind the power of wielding rightly such a weapon as that anger; an anger that was just and strong and calm."

² F. W. Farrar's *Seekers after God*.

What higher thing, then, could man desire than to be like unto them? That this was not the ideal of St. Paul needs not to be said. It is doubtful if he could have understood it; if he could, it is certain he would have repudiated it.

Equally distant is St. Paul's ideal from the emasculate, sentimental thing which sometimes passes itself off as "good nature," but which is not good at all, but only bad because it is weak. The peril of the passive virtues, as has already been said, is that they are so readily counterfeited; yet a good man's forbearance has really as little in common with mere tolerance as his righteous resentment has with malice. The sight of evil ought to awaken indignation within us; we may for good reasons restrain and suppress it, but the feeling should be there; it is the soul's recoil, as natural and instinctive in the morally healthy as the shutting of the eyelids against a threatened blow. The lazy tolerance which is incapable of it is not "good nature," it is simply moral "mushiness." The author of *Ecce Homo* states the truth with even more than his usual lucidity and force: "Because," he says, "it has had a considerable effect in softening manners, because it has given a new prominence and dignity to the female sex, and because it has produced great examples of passive virtues, Christianity is sometimes represented as averse to strong passions, as making men excessively unwilling to inflict pain, as fostering a morbid, or at least a feminine, tenderness. . . . The Enthusiasm of Humanity does indeed destroy a great deal of hatred, but it creates as much more. Selfish hatred is indeed charmed away, but a not less fiery passion takes its place. Dull serpentine malice dies, but a new unselfish anger begins to live. The bitter feelings which so easily spring up against those who thwart us, those who compete with us, those who surpass us, are destroyed by the Enthusiasm of Humanity; but it creates a new bitterness, which displays itself on occasions where

before the mind had reposed in a benevolent calm. It creates an intolerant anger against all who do wrong to human beings, an impatience of selfish enjoyment, a vindictive enmity to tyrants and oppressors, a bitterness against sophistry, superstition, self-complacent heartless speculation, an irreconcilable hostility to every form of imposture, such as the uninspired, inhumane soul could never entertain."¹

III.

Anger, then, must be accorded a place among those affections of our nature which it is our business not to crush but to chasten and to guide. We conclude our account of St. Paul's teaching on the subject with a reference to his warning against all excess and abuse of the passion.

"Be ye angry, and sin not."² Gladstone's biographer says of him, that "in native capacity for righteous anger he abounded. The flame soon kindled, and it was no fire of straw; but it did not master him."³ This is the Christian ideal. Anger is a good servant, but a bad master. As long as it is kept well in hand we may yoke it to many noble ends; in revolt against all authority there is scarcely any mischief of which it may not be the author. Anger is the fire of the soul, and just as a prudent housewife takes care that her kitchen fire neither dies out nor yet grows too fierce, so will the wise man keep watch over himself—at one time rekindling the dying embers, at another pushing in the damper when the flame roars and races in the chimney. Sinless in itself anger can assume shapes of direst wickedness. *Touchiness*, which a spark borne by any chance wind will cause to flare up like gunpowder, and *peevishness*, which, as Butler says, "languidly discharges itself upon everything which comes in its way," and *hatred*, deadly and implacable, "dull, serpentine malice," which

¹ Pop. ed. 26. 1. ² Eph. iv. 26-7. ³ Mo.loy's *Life*, vol. i. 189.

knows neither pity nor change, and *revenge*, clutching at its helpless victim's throat till the utmost farthing be paid—do we not know them all? And all these St. Paul bids us to put away, and to put on rather, “as God's elect, a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering.”¹

Not less noteworthy than his warnings against unrighteous wrath are the Apostle's words against provocation to anger. Fathers he urges not to provoke their children to wrath²; masters he enjoins, in their dealings with their servants, to “forbear threatening,”³ and all men he exhorts not to be “vain-glorious, provoking one another, envying one another.”⁴ This is one of the most practical aspects of a practical matter which does not receive the attention it deserves. It is the duty of every man to avoid giving needless provocation, and perhaps there are none who need more to lay that duty to heart than just those who are themselves endowed with a double portion of the grace of good temper. For it is a matter of common experience that good-natured people are of all men sometimes the most exasperating. Their good nature goes along with a certain slackness which to others of prompt and business-like habits is a source of continual vexation. The servant whose easy-going ways bring down upon him the sharp—perhaps too sharp—rebuke of a quick-tempered master who has disciplined himself by the habits of a lifetime to punctuality and thoroughness, ought not to content himself with lamenting his master's loss of temper; he should set about to cure the slackness which has provoked it. And in every way it should be the aim of all to “give no occasion of stumbling.” When we have discovered what is another's besetting sin we owe it to him to put no

¹ Col. iii. 12, 13.

² Eph. vi 4; Col. iii. 21.

³ Eph. vi. 9

⁴ Gal. v. 26.

temptation in his path, but, as far as in us lies, to take sides with him in seeking to overcome it. If it is the passionate man's duty to pour water upon the gunpowder of his nature, it is none the less ours to avoid scattering idle sparks in his presence.

GEORGE JACKSON.

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN.

VI.

CHRISTIAN HEART ASSURANCE.

Herein we shall know that we are of the truth,
 And before Him [God] shall assure our hearts :
 Because, if our heart condemn us—because God is greater than our
 heart and knows all !
 Beloved, if our heart do not condemn us, we have confidence toward
 God,
 And whatsoever we may ask we receive from Him ;
 Because we keep His commands, and do the things pleasing in
 His sight.
 And this is His command :
 That we believe the name of His Son Jesus Christ,
 And love one another as He gave us command.
 And he that keeps His commands, dwells in Him—and He in him.
 And herein we know that He dwells in us,—from the Spirit that He
 gave us.

—1 *John* iii. 19-24.

THIS section of the Epistle is separated from that which we examined in Paper V. (*vv.* 4-10 : on *The Inadmissibility of Sin*) by a digression on the contrasted cases of Cain and Jesus (*vv.* 11-18), the false and the true Son of Man, who supply the patterns of hate and of love respectively and represent the conflicting types of humanity, "the children of the Devil" and "the children of God" (*v.* 10). Sin, it had been shown, belonged to the world that is passing away, and took on in its prototype Cain, the two conspicuous features of unrighteousness and hate. This Satanic manifestation was confronted with its opposite in the self-devotion of Jesus, in whose sacrifice the readers are to find not only the means of their salvation from sin, but